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SUBJECT: POLITICS IN KISII LAND

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[1](#)1. Summary: The Kisii community, accounting for four percent of Kenya's population, have been loyal to FORD-People party baron Simeon Nyachae, who supports the Kibaki administration. Now that Nyachae has announced his retirement from politics, opposition politicians are eyeing the Kisii vote. Widespread dissatisfaction with government services in the district gives the opposition an opportunity to pick up four percent of the national vote that had previously been in Kibaki's column. End Summary.

[1](#)2. Simeon Nyachae, Minister of Roads and Chairman of the pro-government FORD-People party, has declared his intent to retire from politics effective later this year given health concerns (he is 75 years old). FORD-People completely dominates the political landscape of Kisii district in Nyanza Province, located in western Kenya on the shores of Lake Victoria. The district is home to the Kisii (or Gusii) people, a Bantu ethnic group that comprises about four percent of Kenya's population. All 10 Members of Parliament (MPs) from the densely populated district represent FORD-People. The party splintered from FORD-Asili in 1997, which in turn is an offshoot of FORD (Forum for the Restoration of Democracy). Nyachae joined FORD-People in 1998 after falling out of favor with then-President Moi. His astute political mobilization tactics created a Kisii voting block that increased FORD-People's representation in parliament from three to ten, but also removed any claim of the party to have a national character.

[1](#)3. Nyachae's leadership of the party has been described as overbearing and dictatorial, allowing little room for dissent or challenge to his tight political control. But there are signs that Nyachae's hold on the Kisii community may be slipping. Despite his strong advocacy throughout 2005 for the government sponsored draft constitution, the majority of Kisii voters rejected the draft in the November 2005 national referendum, including voters in his own constituency. While publicly stating that he will not formally ally FORD-People with NARC-K (Kibaki's likely party for the December 2007 General Election), Nyachae and his party are firmly in the pro-government camp. Recently, however, Nyachae has faced competition within the Kisii community for representing the government. Some pro-NARC-K campaigners are seeking to convince Kisii voters the NARC-K ticket is the way to go, especially given Nyachae's proclaimed retirement intentions.

[1](#)4. In distinction to their firmly opposition-oriented Nyanza Province neighbors, the Luos, the Kisii community tends to favor the Kibaki government. Nyanza Province's population is overwhelmingly Luo, which is Kenya's largest Nilotic ethnic group. As a Bantu ethnic group, the Kisii have more cultural and linguistic affinities with Kibaki's Kikuyu community than they do with their Luo neighbors, and so tend to support

the President. In Kenyan politics, factors of ethnic identity matter a great deal (see reftels). That said, dissatisfaction with the delivery of government services and unmet infrastructure promises have opened a window of opportunity among the Kisii electorate for the opposition ODM-K coalition. The Principal District Officer for Kisii explained to poloff that the national level economic growth rate of six percent has not resulted in improvements in the lives of ordinary Kisii. Despite improved access to education, he said, few would report that they are better off now than they were in 2002 when the Kibaki administration came to power.

15. Although increased access to education is among Kibaki's top re-election campaign themes, the Kisii District Education Officer (DEO) emphasized to poloff that this line does not resonate in the district due to the deplorable state of education in Kisii. The DEO explained that students score at the bottom on the national exam. He reported an acute lack of teachers and poor infrastructure, in both absolute terms and relative to other districts. He stated that there is currently a shortfall of 900 teachers to absorb the increase in students attending primary school. Seventy percent of rural schools in the district lack most essential infrastructure (classrooms, desks, toilets, etc.).

16. Given Nyachae's announced retirement plans and widespread discontent in the district with the government, ODM-K campaigners have achieved the previously unthinkable: campaigning in the district. In previous years, parties other than FORD-People were prevented from campaigning in Kisii by violent intimidation from Nyachae supporters. Nyachae recently came under fire from Kisii ODM-K and NARC-K supporters for remarks deemed intolerant and undemocratic,

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when he stated that parliamentary aspirants must join FORD-People if they wish to contest the coming elections in the district. These new challenges to his supreme control of the region may have contributed to his decision to withdrawal from politics.

Comment: The "Kisii 4 percent" is up for Grabs

17. Nyachae's announcement of his intent to retire may be genuinely related to his ailing health, may be an attempt to avoid the humiliation of losing Kisii to ODM-K, or may even, as some allege, be a ploy to drum up support for his and FORD-People's continued role in national politics. Since his announcement, his allies and supporters have expressed disbelief, and are calling for supporters to urge Nyachae back. Should he indeed leave the stage, this would certainly loosen the hold of FORD-People on Kisii politics, making his protgs political orphans. A significant realignment of party loyalties in the district is a likely result. In a hotly contested presidential election, four percent is well worth fighting over. The Kisii are likely to receive many political suitors in the coming months. End Comment.

Background on Kisii District

18. Located in Nyanza Province, southwestern Kenya, Kisii District is predominantly populated by members of the Kisii (Gusii) community, a Bantu ethnic group. The region is a rich agricultural area with a highland equatorial climate receiving ample rainfall. The district is hilly, very densely populated, with land-poor farmers terracing steep hill sides, thereby contributing to a significant erosion problem. Tea is the major cash crop for the district. Other important crops are bananas, coffee, pyrethrum and sugar cane. The area is also renowned for its lucrative soap stone quarries and brick making industries. The district capital is Kisii Town; estimated population: 120,000. Strategically located on the busy Kenya-Tanzania highway, with good road

access to Kericho (and a restoration of the Kisii-Kilgoris road planned), Kisii town is the economic and transportation hub for the region. A visit to the town on a market day revealed the main street bustling with traders, both in agricultural products and commercial goods.

Biographical Portrait of Simeon Nyachae

¶9. Born 6 February 1932 in Kisii District to the powerful British-appointed Paramount Chief of the Kisii. Educated in the U.K. Entered the colonial civil service in 1960 as a District Officer for Kangundo Division. He rose through the ranks of the provincial administration, serving as Provincial Commissioner, and later appointed by President Moi as Chief Secretary for the Kenyan Civil Service (1984-87). Upon

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retirement from his successful career in the civil service, making him a prominent public figure among the Kisii community, he entered politics in 1992, representing Nyaribari Chache constituency on a KANU ticket. He served as Minister of Agriculture 1992-97 and Minister of Finance 1997-98. After he publicly declared the government bankrupt, Moi transferred him from Finance to the Minister of Industry. Nyachae declined the appointment and so fell out with Moi. He quit government in 1998, joining FORD-People, which was then an opposition party.

¶10. Nyachae ran for President in 2002 on a FORD-people ticket, but was defeated by Kibaki, coming in third place out of a field of five. He garnered 5.8 percent of the national vote, thus attracting some voters outside his Kisii community.

Nyachae's political skills played a role in his inclusion in the cabinet, as Minister of Energy, following Kibaki's 2004 cabinet reshuffle when the President reached out to opposition politicians to form the Government of National Unity. Nyachae was appointed to replace Raila Odinga as Minister of Roads and Public Works in the next cabinet reshuffle which followed the government's defeat in the national referendum on the draft constitution. Nyachae is enormously rich, with wide-ranging business interests throughout Kenya. He has four wives and more than 20 children.

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